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WHAT IS ACHIEVEMENT IN LITERATURE.

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EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION AND EVALUATION IN LITERATURE STUDY DEPEND UPON PRECISE DEFINITION OF BEHAVIORAL OBJECTIVES. BECAUSE OF EASE IN TEACHING AND EVALUATION, CURRICULUM AND TESTING IN LITERATURE ARE DOMINATED BY COGNITIVE SKILLS OF CONTENT RECALL AND RECOGNITION, CLASSIFICATION, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION. TEACHERS TEND TO CONCENTRATE ON LITERARY FACT RATHER THAN ON READER RESPONSE OR "ENGAGEMENT" OF STUDENT AND LITERARY WORK. THE IMPORTANT GOALS, WHICH SHOULD BE THE STARTING POINT, ARE IN THE AREA OF EVALUATION AND LEAD ULTIMATELY TO DEVELOPMENT OF GENERALIZED ATTITUDES, TASTE AND JUDGMENT. IF THE STUDENT BEGINS WITH A STUDY OF HIS OWN RESPONSE TO LITERATURE, ATTAINMENT OF THE COGNITIVE OBJECTIVES WILL NECESSARILY FOLLOW. (AL)

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WHAT IS ACHIEVEMENT IN LITERATURE?

Every teacher of literature is inevitably concerned with the evaluation of his students. He must certify that those who have spent a semester or a year under his tutelage have done something other than look intelligent so that they may go on to whatever the next educational step may be. When most teachers confront this nasty business of evaluation, however, I suspect that they feel a slight queasiness about the process. They know their students as individuals or as minds in process, but they are a bit unsure as to just what it is that bright-looking girl in the second row has accomplished. When they set a task--an hour-test on a novel, a final examination, a comprehensive--teachers more often than not tremulously put in questions that they hope will "really make them think" or "separate the sheep from the goats." Too often, though, the bright-looking girl in the second row turns in a dull answer, and the sheep and the goats remain homogeneous. After all, does the teacher of literature want to produce sheep or goats?

The problem of the evaluator is exacerbated when he must create a test for a group that he has never seen. It is then, as never before, that he comes up squarely before the question of the nature of achievement in literature. Whatever the merits or defects of external examinations, they do force the examiner to define the goals of education and find ways to measure them. Nowhere is this problem of definition more beclouded than in literature, partly because literature is a verbal art and partly because the subject matter of literature is unconfined save by the limits of man's imagination. I was forced to confront the problem when I was asked to work on an international study of achievement in literature, and it is about a part of that study that I should like to talk, because I hope that what I have to say about a large-scale study will have relevance for the classroom teacher. I shall, therefore, begin with description and move to sermonizing

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A group of educational researchers in various countries formed an alliance called International Educational Attainment (I.E.A.), which sought to compare the educational systems of different countries not merely in their demographic and organizational patterns but in terms of what the students in those systems achieve. Their first study was in mathematics, and the results of that study (which have recently been published) have already poked the educational hornet's nest. The second phase of the IEA studies will include several subjects, of which literature is one.

The literature study seeks to examine what it is that students do when they talk or write about a literary work; in this sense it is a repetition of I. A. Richards' Practical Criticism on a larger scale. We expect that there will be national and cross-national patterns of response to a work of literature, and that these patterns will be related to such things as student tracking and school organization as well as to the student's knowledge about and attitudes towards literature, his place vis á vis the mass and the elite culture of his nation, and particularly to the type of training he receives in literature and the stated aims of literature teaching in the nation or part of the nation in which the student resides. In order to make this examination, we must first find some way of defining the curricula. The task of definition has been my concern recently; and, with Nancy Dill of Teachers College, Columbia, and Joel Weiss of The University of Chicago, and the advice of a committee of those concerned with the English curriculum--the task is largely completed.

When we looked at the statements about the curriculum in literature, we became confused. There abound statements like "to form a permanent reading habit," "to read literature with pleasure and understanding," "to meet youth's needs through literature," "to know where desirable reading materials may be obtained," and "to read literature of excellence." The documents then proceed, more often than not, to excoriations

of Black Beauty or "Trees" and vauntings of The Heart of Darkness or "The Ancient Mariner," to damnations of Zona Gale and praise of Shakespeare. Some documents, of course, boost Miss Gale and damn Sir Walter Scott, but nearly all of them get caught up on the content of literature curricula and are at best general and at worst vague about what the student is to do with these books. We needed some sort of precision about what it is teachers want students to do before we could internationally or nationally (not to mention locally) say that they have achieved something. To assimilate these vague statements, we borrowed the notion of the educational psychologists that there are in any discipline a content and a series of behaviors, things that people do or are supposed to do with content. Content and behavior come close to defining educational objectives. I have had passed out and would call to your attention a summary of the objectives we have found, and I should like to discuss certain of these objectives.

What is the content of literary education in the United States? Books, as you might have suspected. Poetry, drama, fiction, and all the rest that is not poetry, drama, or fiction but that appears in anthologies and courses. There are the mass media; there is literary history, there is the biography of authors, literary terminology, critical systems and theories of literary forms, and there is certain cultural information--the myths, the Biblical stories, the folklore which lie at the back of much of our best literature. All of these one might expect to form the parts of the domain of literature, and one can easily sub-divide them further according to a required degree of precision. We found it useful to note the difference between contemporary and pre-contemporary literature; which seemed more important than a division between American and English literature or between literature in English and literature in translation. We did not, however, find a meaningful distinction between literary history and social, cultural, or political history except at the advanced undergraduate and graduate levels.

It would seem then, that the content of literature courses is fairly stable. There are fluctuations of the stock of the various genres, and there are, of course, differences between individual curricula as to the titles and authors, but as anyone who has been on a textbook selection committee knows, these differences are really small. Poetry texts daren't exclude Sharespeare's sonnets; short story anthologies have a sameness beneath the differences in jacket, apparatus, and typography. Humanities courses, whether dealing with man's aspirations or man the creator are pretty sure bets to include Homer, Sophocles, Swift, and Dostoevsky. Nearly all of these texts and curricula pay some attention to critical terminology and theory, and to biographical, historical, and cultural information.

Yet there is another noteworthy division of content of literature courses, what we have called "Any literary work." Its existence seems predicated on the notion that if a student can read one text in the prescribed manner, he can read any text in the same manner, that there are transferable abilities regardless of the work read or studied. Many curricula, therefore, do not make elaborate distinctions between genres, because they assume that literature courses must produce a marketable skill or else English teachers would be condemned to composition and the worse aspects of language study. Whether there are transferable skills gained from the close analysis of "The Windhover" is perhaps debatable, but all seem to hope there is. Let us see what those skills might be.

At the lowest level, of course, there is the recall and recognition of these various bits of content. Students are often expected to remember who is in what play and who wrote what; they are expected to recognize a passage from a work they have read and to spot metaphors and puns if they are told what these things are that they are looking for. A majority of the test questions in both classroom and national tests ask for these two behaviors, but they do not seem to be the transferable skills that will justify the teaching of literature. Does anyone really care whether

a student can remember which novel contains "Wandering Willie's Tale" or what the difference between metonymy or synechdoche is? Only schoolteachers seem to care.

The next series of behaviors fall under the heading of classification, in this case the application of some set of information to a new phenomenon. First is the application of one literary text to another; that is the noting of similarities between Oedipus and Hamlet or between "Hyperion" and Paradise Lost. Second is biographical classification or the application of the writer's life to a literary work. Third comes the similar skill of historical classification. The application of historical data to a literary text is a skill demonstrated in answers to questions on Darwin's influence on Hardy or Dickens and the French Revolution. Such skills are useful to the historian, to the one who is committed to sorting out and understanding the past, but I wonder if they suffice the student who is not going on to be a history major, the one who needs to be led to a committment to reading Dickens in the first place. For his teacher there arises the question as to whether the ability to place a literary work in its biographical or historical context is the most important objective.

The three other classificatory skills are directed at the nexus between reader and text, but they are as special as biographical and historical classification in that they serve to define the professional critic. The application of literary terminology, of critical theory, and of cultural or mythological information are surely useful appurtenances to the understanding of a literary text and its relation to the body of literature. It helps to be able to use the language of literary criticism (even if at times the language descends to mere jargon). It helps to see a play in the light of Aristotle's Poetics. It helps to see the relationship between a short story and a Biblical theme or between Shane and Sir Lancelot. With these classificatory skills one can speak of a literary work more intelligently to other critics and teachers, but these skills are hardly ends in themselves. Rather they are tools for

discourse, and the acquisition of these tools can often narrow the discourse rather than broaden it. In less than mature minds, classification closes thought, as any English teacher knows, both with respect to literature and with respect to the world at large. Many others, I feel sure, have been dismayed by the student who thinks he is another Northrop Frye when he announces that a line of verse has five iambic feet and thinks that that is all he need say. He is not unlike the writer who says that someone is a marxist and thinks the label suffices. Important as classification is to learning, it is not all of learning.

The skills of classification like the skills of recall and recognition are easy to teach and easier to test. They therefore dominate much of our curricula and our national testing programs. One has little trouble marking a student right or wrong, one has less trouble assuring himself of his success as a teacher, but one has great trouble justifying major emphasis to these skills, for the student who has mastered them has acquired but little that is meaningful in literary education.

The next order of behaviors towards a literary work becomes more complex, because it involves more than simple cognition. We have included them under the general heading of the expressed response. Response itself is the best term, we think, for that Gordian combination of affective, cognitive, perceptual, and psychomotor activities that take place when a person reads a book. Response itself is necessarily private in that one can never tell what the whole response is, and less whether it has changed or developed. Certainly one cannot presume to evaluate it.

Yet teachers do ask students to report on their response, either orally or on paper. What they get may be as true a report as the student can muster; more probably it is a compromise between the private response and what the student thinks the teacher desires. The reported or expressed response I have described elsewhere as consisting of statements of engagement, perception, interpretation, and evaluation.

Engagement is best defined as the report of the effect of the work on the reader, how he reacts to the form or content of the work. Expression of engagement is an expression of the literary experience, not the literary fact. There are serious questions about the place of engagement in the curriculum, particularly about whether it can be inculcated or developed and whether it can be evaluated. Its importance is undeniable, it is given scant attention because it is hard to deal with and may strike school administrators as unintellectual.

Teachers and testers flee engagement for the safety of interpretation and particularly perception which includes both the classification described earlier and analysis. They eschew evaluation for reasons like those for which they shy away from engagement. Both come close to trampling on the student's constitutional right of privacy. Analysis, like classification, is subject to empirical verification. A plot is or is not tripartite; form and content have or have not a relationship that can be established. Interpretation, particularly symbolic and hortatory interpretation (that the work teaches something or urges a point) is less clear-cut a study, but an interpretation can be judged by the rules of argument and evidence, if not by empirical verification. And certainly, when one has a student write an analytic or interpretive paper, one can assert that he has had practice in the sort of argument or exposition that will stand him in good stead as a literary critic—or as an insurance salesman. Writing about one's evaluation can have the same sort of pedagogic value, but too often, teachers neglect it because it comes close to taste, that aspect of literary study which everyone secretly desires to impart but with which no one dare tamper. I would suggest that evaluation is not taste but establishes the premises of taste and as such is as suited to the purposes of training in composition as are analysis and interpretation. A topic such as "Why do you think this is a good or bad poem?" can produce a more exciting essay than "What do you think this poem means?"

But there is a problem: education in writing about literature is education in writing, not in literature or what is called the "literary sensibility." Critics of the study of literature can well ask: "Why then literature if it is to be justified only as a stimulus for rhetoric?" One answer might be that the student becomes so versed in the techniques of the expressed response--according to an analytic, interpretive, or evaluative mode--that these techniques will inform his response, thus making the public private. One can further hope that the response to literature will influence the response to any sort of experience. At best, this justification leads to indoctrination into the pleasures of the intellect, but at its worst it substitutes methodology for response. Despite its dangers, there is merit in this justification and in concentration on these behaviors, but I do not think that such concentration is sufficient.

The other behaviors related to the expressed response include: "Express a pattern of response to," "Express a pattern of preference," and "Express a variety of responses to." The first of these refers to a set order of writing about or speaking about literature, that is, some system of expressed response, and is reflected in the curriculum that establishes a set of a priori relationships between discourse about engagement, perception, interpretation, and evaluation. The second, "express a pattern of preference for," is taste, and is certainly a covert goal of literary education reinforced by the very fact of the text or anthology or reading list which set a magic circle around the literary works they contain. In many curricula it is an overt goal, although there is some apology for it and some attempt to cover it with such terms as "adopt high critical standards." It might be salutary if English teachers were to muster their courage and say whether or not they want to influence their students' taste. The third behavior "Express a variety of responses to," seems to be the denial of the first of this series, but it is not. The first

asserts that there is a best method of approach to a literary work; the third asserts that the capacity to respond to literary works changes, and that although a well-formulated response to a work may take a certain form, yet there are a variety of possible responses. A student can appreciate Alice in Wonderland as a children's book and as a complex allegory, and a mature student should be able to do both, if not simultaneously, at least seriatim. This goal asks that students develop a repertoire of responses suitable to the occasion, that they be able to accept Dante and Peanuts for what they are. Although seldom mentioned, the goal is held by those who are most concerned with the curriculum from kindergarten to the college years.

The three behaviors that are listed after response itself deal primarily with attitude. Teachers want students to be willing to read good literature and to enjoy the literary experience, and they want students to accept the many values that a free literature has in a free society. All of these are, in a sense, long-range goals; and curricular statements frequently refer to them as vague hopes rather than as specific outcomes of education in literature. The behaviors that indicate that people respect and enjoy literature, that they have developed a mature and eclectic taste and capacity to respond to the great variety of literary works, cannot, it would seem, be the prime focus of teachers of literature. But it is the inculcation of these behaviors that will keep literature teachers in business and keep literature an important part of our culture. The other behaviors are only means to an end. So far, literature teachers have stayed in business and literature has remained important, but it has declined in importance as far as students are concerned. One senses that the threat of a world which seems inimical to "all the best that has been thought and said" is growing more real and present.

I would suggest that as long as teachers, curriculum builders, and testers concentrate on the testable—on recall, application, analysis, interpretation—they will not lessen the threat. The important goals of education in literature are those

about which there is no certainty: the engagement of a student, his taste, his judgment, his private response, his capacity for response, and his attitudes towards literature and the literary experience. If the student fails to live up to the standard that teachers set by their example in these behaviors, the literature curriculum has failed. Example is not enough; teachers need to be clear and specific about these goals, if only to gain the respect of our best students.

One wonders if the teacher can stay the threat of failure. I suggest that there may be ways to do so, and I like to conclude by setting forth one way. It is the quite simple one of setting as a part of the content of literature study not any work of literature, but any response to a work of literature. Teachers would do well were they to take as a starting point not "Ozymandias" but "I don't dig Ozymandias," and make the student aware of what his response is and what it was that caused it. The student could come to self-understanding, and certainly to an understanding of the text and the ways by which it makes it effect. It is this sort of self-consciousness that can contribute to intellectual growth. Perhaps an understanding of the nature of one's response can lead to the desire to read more. Certainly it will give the student self-respect, because the teacher realizes that it takes not only a book, but a reader. The particular use of engagement as a starting point will give engagement—without which there is no response—a centrality in the curriculum that it has in the experience of literature; perception, interpretation, evaluation, and all the other skills will follow from it. So too will taste and attitude, for they are both definable as the willingness to become engaged, to be "hooked on books"—if I may borrow that title. A self-aware engagement is an informed taste and will inform attitudes.

What I am suggesting is not a substitution of group-analysis for literary study nor is it the panacea for sluggish hours over Silas Marner, but it is one of the ways, and there are many others, by which the teacher can keep all of the desired behaviors

of literary education in mind, and not limit himself to the testable or the pragmatically justifiable. Only if all the behaviors are kept in mind may there be a literary education that will be able to assert its inherent vitality and keep literature a viable force in our society. Finally, as a tester, let me say that if teachers do not place importance on all of the behaviors, but remain content with those easy to teach, they cannot be surprised if a testing organization follows their lead and slights what is most important to literary education.

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